

Rockford Historic Preservation Commission

2004 Annual Report

2004 was an active year for Rockford's Historic Preservation Commission. Commission activities included:

- Review of 39 requests for Certificates of Appropriateness;
- Review of a request for local landmark designation;
- Review of a request for an addition to a local historic district (a first);
- Training for Commission members on legal issues;
- Cooperation with River District in holding a workshop on how to research your home, and publication of a related document;
- Review of one project requiring a Section 106 review; and
- Review of two National Register nominations.

Here in more detail is our year in review.

Cases Reviewed

Rockford's Historic Preservation Ordinance requires that a Certificate of Appropriateness (COA) be issued by the Preservation Commission before any changes may be made to the exterior of locally designated properties. Of the 39 applications for Certificates in 2004, 36 were approved, 2 were denied, and 1 was never acted on. The last one was due to the unclear nature of the application and the fact that the owner never came to either of the meetings at which it was placed on the agenda.

Certificates granted in 2004 included improvements to 12 residential properties in Brown's Hills/Knightsville, 1 on Garfield Avenue, 9 in Haight Village, 1 commercial property in Northeast State & Main, and 5 landmark properties.

311 Grove Street Located mid-block on Grove Street just south of Ingersoll Centennial Park, this house went through several changes (and two owners) during the past year. It was long used as rental property and had suffered more than one inappropriate "improvement" over the years. The property first came to the Commission's attention when the then-new owner was cited for a violation – installing yellow vinyl fishscale shingles in the gable end of the entryway. When he applied for a COA, he changed this to a request for cedar shake shingles. This was



denied on the grounds that it was just as inappropriate as the yellow vinyl. When he installed the cedar shake anyway, he was cited for another violation. At that point, he found a buyer for the property and sold it, leaving the new owners to deal with the violations. This they did by obtaining a COA to remove the entryway, leaving the original materials behind it intact. While this ended up in a positive way, it also highlighted what can sometimes be a serious problem – owners who willfully ignore the rules, then leave new owners with violations to deal with. This was one of two cases that came to the Commission’s attention where this occurred in 2004.

201 West State Street Located at the corner of West State and North Wyman Streets, 201 West State is the most highly visible – and oldest – building in the Northeast State & Main Historic District. The most dramatic change that will take place when work is completed will be the return to the original brick facade on the front after the metal panels are removed. This will also result in the renewal of 10 original windows which had been covered by the panels. Photos below illustrate the changes that will occur.



737 North Main Street (Burpee Museum of Natural History) In one of the more interesting cases dealt with by the Commission in 2004, Burpee Museum asked for (and got) approval to install a green roof system on the canopy at the entrance to their Solem Wing addition. This is a grid system of 82 plastic modules that fit into the canopy roof. Most are about 2 feet deep; none are nailed, glued, screwed or tacked on in any way to the roof system. They are set within each other and the weight of the matrix holds everything in place.

123 South Main Street After the City acquired the southern $\frac{2}{3}$ of the structure, it immediately searched for ways to stabilize the building. While the first floor had been in use as a restaurant in the recent past, the upper floors had been vacant for many years. Windows on the upper floors had been replaced with what amounted to large baggies and chicken wire. With the stated intention of mothballing the building until it can be redeveloped in the future, the City received approval to install Plexiglass over all the window openings to keep moisture out of the building and also improve its appearance. Other work that was approved included tuckpointing where necessary, and wrapping a canvas awning around the green sign-board on the front of the building. The fire escape was secured as well.



Tinker Swiss Cottage Museum Continuing in their tradition of nontraditional requests, Tinker Swiss Cottage Museum received approval to reconstruct Robert Tinker's suspension bridge over Kent Creek. Because of a variety of issues relating to accessibility and to modern bridge construction standards, it took several years to obtain all the approvals necessary for this project. Official approval by the Preservation Commission was the last step in that process. It is hoped that construction will be completed in 2005.

Garrison School The Commission granted approval for the redevelopment of the building and site, including restoration of the original school building and gymnasium, demolition of the 1969 "pod" addition, and construction of new condo units and parking on the east half and northeast quarter of the lot. All of the units on the site will be condominium units. Although construction has not yet begun, it is hoped that it will be underway in 2005.



Local Designations

During the past year, Rockford's Preservation Commission recommended the designation of one new landmark and the addition of two parcels to the Brown's Hills/Knightsville Historic District.

Beyer Field Ticket Gatehouse The ticket gatehouse is the last remaining physical structure associated with Beyer Field, home of the Rockford Peaches and also to Rockford high school football and baseball programs for many years. The application was submitted by "Friends of Beyer Park" with the consent of the owner, the Rockford Park District. Designation covers the 80' x 80' corner of 15th Avenue and Seminary Street, not the entire field. The gatehouse sits on this corner and is largely unchanged. The designation was approved by Rockford City Council in June 2004.



Addition to Brown's Hills/Knightsville Historic District The new owner of 748 Joslyn Street and the adjacent parcel submitted an application for addition of his two parcels to the historic district. This marked the first time anyone had ever requested an addition to any of Rockford's local historic districts. The owner had carried out a substantial renovation of the property and wanted it to be recognized as a part of the historic district. Designation also enabled him to make use of the State's property tax freeze program. The addition was approved by Rockford City Council in June 2004.



Surveys

No new survey work was begun in 2004. However, the Commission's staff did begin the task of

consolidating all of the files from previous surveys, beginning with the initial one done in 1979-1981. Some were in file folders, some were in binders, and some were digital files. All are being placed in the same system to allow for easier access and to ensure that when an address is checked, all available pieces of information are looked at.

Monitoring

The Commission reviewed two nominations for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, one for an individual structure and one for a district.

- ▶ **Elks Club Lodge #64** This building at 210 West Jefferson Street was designated as a local landmark in 2003. In order to be able to make use of the 20% federal income tax credit for historic preservation projects, the owner sought listing on the National Register as well. The Commission recommended that the nomination be granted, which it was in early 2005.
- ▶ **7th Street Historic District** The proposed district extends 7½ blocks along 7th Street from Charles Street south to Keith Creek. It is one of Rockford's oldest historical commercial districts with buildings dating back to just after the Civil War. The nomination was sought by the Mid Town District, a business group representing this area and beyond. Their goal was for as many buildings in the district as possible to be eligible for use of the 20% federal income tax credit for historic preservation projects. The Commission recommended approval of the nomination under two National Register criteria – A because of its history as a predominantly Swedish settlement and early commercial district, and C because of the distinctive architectural characteristics of many of the buildings and the presence of the work of leading local architects. The nomination is currently under review by the Keeper of the National Register.

Activities involving sites already listed on the National Register included:

- ▶ Certificates of Appropriateness listed above for the Chick House (123 South Main Street) and for Tinker Swiss Cottage Museum. The former should stabilize a structure that was in very poor condition while the latter allows a very active museum to take another major step forward in returning not just the main structure but the site as a whole to a condition that the original owners would recognize.
- ▶ The Commission was saddened to learn of the death of the Therese Schmeltzer, owner of the Graham-Ginestra House, and still waits to find out what the final disposition of the property will be. As the property is also listed as a local landmark, there is a higher level of protection than National Register status provides, but it still remains a fairly tenuous situation until the ultimate ownership is decided on.
- ▶ The Commission elected to pursue enforcement of the minimum maintenance requirement of the ordinance in one situation. The house at 326 South 3rd Street, which lies in both a local and a National Register historic district, had fallen into serious disrepair. The owner had been brought to code hearing through the Building Department process with little effect. Due to financial constraints, the owner was unable to make any of the repairs needed. She



subsequently put the house up for sale. At last report, it had been purchased by a new owner. This case was considered important by the Commission not only because of the increasingly negative impact it was having on the neighborhood, but also because of the importance of the house itself. Built in 1883, it was the home of William Brown who served as State's Attorney, Mayor of Rockford, State Representative and circuit court judge; and is very distinctive architecturally.

Activities

Training Following the application to designate St. Mary's Church in 2003, staff felt it was important to ensure that Commission members were familiar with the legal demands of their positions. Consequently, the Commission Secretary and attorney put together a training session for Commission members to cover legal issues. Special emphasis was placed on the need for consistency, on making decisions based on information that is on the record, and avoiding *ex parte* communications. All but one Commission member attended the training session. In addition, the Commission viewed IHPA videos on architectural styles and on windows at succeeding meetings.

Ordinance amendment Also following the St. Mary application, a member of City Council asked that Rockford's preservation ordinance be amended so that religious properties could only be designated under the local ordinance with the owner's consent. At the suggestion of another alderman, this was changed to require a super-majority vote of City Council for any landmark designation being sought without the owner's consent. This provision was passed and is now part of our ordinance.

Joint project with the River District For the second time, the Commission joined forces with the River District – Rockford's downtown organization – to set up a workshop. This time the subject was how to research the history of a property. The workshop was held on May 1st and the resulting booklet, entitled *Building History: A Guide to Architectural Research in the Rock River Valley*, was prepared and has since been posted on both River District's and the City's websites.



River Oaks In August, IHPA asked for comments from the Commission on the proposed demolition of the River Oaks retirement home at 2400 South Main Street. This was as part of the Section 106 review process mandated by the National Historic Preservation Act and applied to any project considered to be a federal undertaking. In this case, the proposal was to pay for the demolition with CDBG funds. A representative of the development group that wants to build new townhomes on the sites attended the August meeting to explain the project. Later that month, Commission members toured the site and viewed drawings of the building supplied by HPC member Frank St. Angel who is with Bradley and Bradley, original designers of

River Oaks. Following the tour and another lengthy discussion with a representative of the development team, the Commission voted unanimously to recommend to IHPA that the building has potential to be listed on the National Register because of its architectural and social significance, and because of the involvement of Bradley and Bradley in the original design. Ultimately, the decision was made to use local funds to pay for the demolition.

Barber Colman Village The City of Rockford acquired the 26-acre Barber Colman complex off South Main Street in 2002. Once the world headquarters of the Barber Colman Company, a major manufacturing firm, the site had fallen on hard times. In early 2004, the City named a team to serve as master developer of the site – Hendricks Commercial Properties and the River Street Collaborative, a consortium of four Rockford architectural firms. At the same time, the City was moving forward with an environmental review of the site. The conclusion of this work was that Buildings 14 and 15 suffered from heavy metal contamination and would have to be removed. Since US EPA funds were involved, this was subject to the same Section 106 review as was the River Oaks project. Because of the extensive work done on the environmental conditions on the site, IHPA did approve the demolition of these two buildings. However, they conditioned any future demolitions on completion of a comprehensive historic resources survey of the entire site. To that end, the City issued a Request for Proposals for a qualified historic preservation consultant to carry out the survey and also to complete a National Register nomination of the site. The RFP was issued in December; work should be completed in 2005.